

TWO MIRACLES OF THE VIRGIN IN THE POEMS OF GAUTIER DE COINCY

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Students of Western medieval literature and art are familiar with the different collections of the miracles of the Virgin; among these the “Miracles Notre Dame” by the Benedictine monk Gautier de Coincy, prior of Vic-sur-Aisne, composed in the early thirteenth century, was a great favorite, judging from the number of copies that are preserved.¹ The literary sources of Gautier de Coincy’s poem have been thoroughly explored;² the illustrations of the beautiful manuscript of the Bibliothèque Nationale, Nouv. acq. fr. 24541, have been studied by H. Focillon.³ I venture, nevertheless, to consider two of the miniatures, for the accounts of these miracles are derived from Greek sources and the illustrations help us to see the different approaches of Eastern and Western artists.

The text of this manuscript is written in beautiful Gothic script in two columns; the miniatures are painted in rectangular panels drawn above one text column, except for the frontispiece which is a full-page composition. The backgrounds are decorated with fleur-de-lys patterns or geometric motifs. The miniature on folio 149v represents St. Mercurius killing Emperor Julian (Fig. 1). Gautier de Coincy relates that Julian had threatened Basil, bishop of Caesarea, saying that he would kill him and his companions as soon as he had defeated the

Persians. Basil and his companions pray to the Virgin, and Basil, falling asleep, sees in his dream the Virgin who orders Mercurius to go and kill Julian: “Va tost, va tost, sans déléance/ De Julien me prent vengeance.” And as Julian was on the banks of the Euphrates, fighting against the Persians, Mercurius appeared suddenly on his horse, killed Julian, and disappeared just as rapidly.

The miniature is a direct illustration of the latter part of Gautier’s verses. Mercurius, a young knight mounted on his steed, charges and pierces with his lance Emperor Julian who, fallen from his horse, tries to protect himself; he is surrounded by his guard who, with raised swords, threaten Mercurius in vain.

The Byzantine sources give slightly different accounts of the death of Julian the Apostate. According to the World Chronicle by John Malalas, Basil saw in a dream Christ who ordered Mercurius to depart and kill Emperor Julian, the enemy of the Christians. Mercurius disappeared and, reappearing immediately, shouted: “Julian the emperor is slain as you, O Lord, commanded.”⁴ This story is repeated in the Paschal Chronicle,⁵ but it is slightly modified in the eighth century. According to John Damascene, Basil, standing before an image of the Virgin on which Mercurius was also represented, begged the Virgin to cause Julian’s death. Mercurius suddenly disappeared and reappeared shortly after holding a blood-stained lance.⁶ It is not surprising to see an image of the Virgin introduced into the account written by John Damascene, the great defender of images, but it is only in the late eighth and early ninth centuries that the intervention of the Virgin is recalled in a clear manner. In the life of Basil, by Amphilocius, bishop of Ico-

¹ *Les miracles de la Sainte Vierge traduits et mis en vers par Gautier de Coincy*, ed. Poquet (Paris, 1857).

² A. P. Ducrot-Granderye, “Etudes sur les Miracles Notre Dame de Gautier de Coincy,” *AnnAcFenn* 35 (Helsinki, 1932), 19 f. A. Mussafija, *Untersuchungen über die Quellen des Gautier de Coincy*, DenkWien 44, Abt. 1.

³ H. Focillon, *Le peintre des Miracles de Notre Dame* (Paris, 1950). This manuscript was among those exhibited at the Bibliothèque Nationale in 1955 and again in 1968; *Manuscrits à peintures du XII^e au XVI^e siècle* (Paris, 1955), no. 113, pl. xiv. *La Librairie de Charles V*, Bibliothèque Nationale (Paris, 1968), no. 151, pl. 15. See also Comte de Laborde, *Les Miracles de Notre Dame, compilés par Jean Mielot, secrétaire de Philippe le Bon, duc de Bourgogne*, Société française de reproductions de manuscrits à peintures (Paris, 1928), chap. iii, p. 10 f.

⁴ PG 97, col. 497.

⁵ PG 92, col. 748.

⁶ PG 94, col. 1277.

nium, Basil, alarmed by Julian's threats, had gone with his monks to Mount Didymus; having fallen asleep, he saw in his dream the Virgin seated on a throne, surrounded by the celestial host, who ordered Mercurius to go and kill Julian who had sinned against her son, Jesus Christ. Mercurius disappeared. Basil, awakened, went to the church where Mercurius was buried and his arms were deposited; when he learned that the arms had disappeared, he called the people and gave thanks to the Lord.⁷

The source of Gautier de Coincy is this text of Pseudo-Amphilocius which had been translated into Latin by Anastasius Bibliothecarius.⁸ The same text also explains the scenes that illustrate the second *Invectiva contra Iulianum* in the well-known manuscript of the *Homilies* of Gregory of Nazianzus of the Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris, gr. 510.⁹ At the end of his second homily Gregory, mentioning the death of Julian the Apostle, refers to the different accounts, and it is clear that he does not know which one is correct; according to some, he was shot down by the Persians, others report that he was killed by one of his officers, others again attribute the act to a Saracen or to one of the barbarian jesters.¹⁰ The first of the three scenes illustrating the second *Invectiva* (Fig. 2) does not correspond to any specific passage but serves as a kind of introduction, showing Julian arriving in Persia, as specified by the inscription IOVΛIANOC ΑΠΕΡΧΟΜΕΝΟC EN ΠΙE[PCIΔI]. The second, in which Basil and another bishop (whose facial type recalls that of Gregory of Nazianzus), as well as a deacon, a group of monks and young men, are assembled in prayer, is a free interpretation of the text of Pseudo-Amphilocius. For my purpose, that is, a comparison with the miniature of Gautier de Coincy's text, only the last scene, Mercurius killing Julian, need be considered. I do not imply by this that there is any direct or indirect connection between the two miniatures, but the scene of Mercu-

⁷PG 29, ccciv.

⁸PL 73, cols. 295–312. Episodes from the life of Basil, inspired by this text, decorate the walls of the church of S. Maria in Gradellis in Rome (former Temple of Fortuna Virile), as well as the New Church of Tokali Kilise in Cappadocia, but the death of Julian does not appear in these fragmentary cycles: G. de Jerphanion, "Histoires de saint Basile dans les peintures cappadociennes et dans les peintures romaines du moyen âge," *Byz* 6 (1931), 535–58. J. Lafontaine, *Peintures médiévales dans le temple dit de la Fortune Virile à Rome* (Brussels-Rome, 1959), 35–40, pls. 12–13.

⁹H. Omont, *Miniatures des plus anciens manuscrits grecs de la Bibliothèque Nationale* (Paris, 1929), pl. LIV.

¹⁰PG 35, cols. 664–720.

rius killing Julian is the only one that will be retained by Byzantine and East Christian artists. For instance, in the *Liturgical Homilies* of Gregory of Nazianzus, Athos, Pantaleimon 6, while the head-piece of the homily against Julian shows bishops, seated, Mercurius killing Julian is represented in the margin of folio 242v.¹¹ Elsewhere Julian is considered as the personification of the wicked. For instance, next to Isa. 26:10: "Let favour be shewed to the wicked, yet will he not learn righteousness, and will not behold the majesty of the Lord," the illustrator of the London Psalter of A.D. 1066 has represented Isaiah praying, right hand raised toward the icon of Christ, and pointing with the left to an angel who drags a man fallen on the ground and identified by the inscription as Julian the Apostle.¹²

St. Mercurius was in great honor among the Copts, and in two Coptic manuscripts he is represented killing Emperor Julian. In London, Brit. Mus. Or. 6801, a collection of homilies for the feast of St. Mercurius and for the Nativity, copied in the tenth-eleventh century, Mercurius pierces with his lance Julian who has fallen from his horse and is lying on the ground (Fig. 3).¹³ In the Coptic manuscript no. 66 of the Vatican Library Mercurius again pierces with his lance Julian who is here represented as an aged, bearded man, while an angel presents a sword to Mercurius.¹⁴

The poem of Gautier de Coincy, which immediately follows, refers to the siege of the noble city of Constantinople by the Muslim king Muselinus, at the time when the emperor was Theodosios and the patriarch St. Germanos (Fig. 4).¹⁵ The king is surprised that the stones hurled against the walls do not harm them any more than would fresh cheese, and looking up he sees descending from

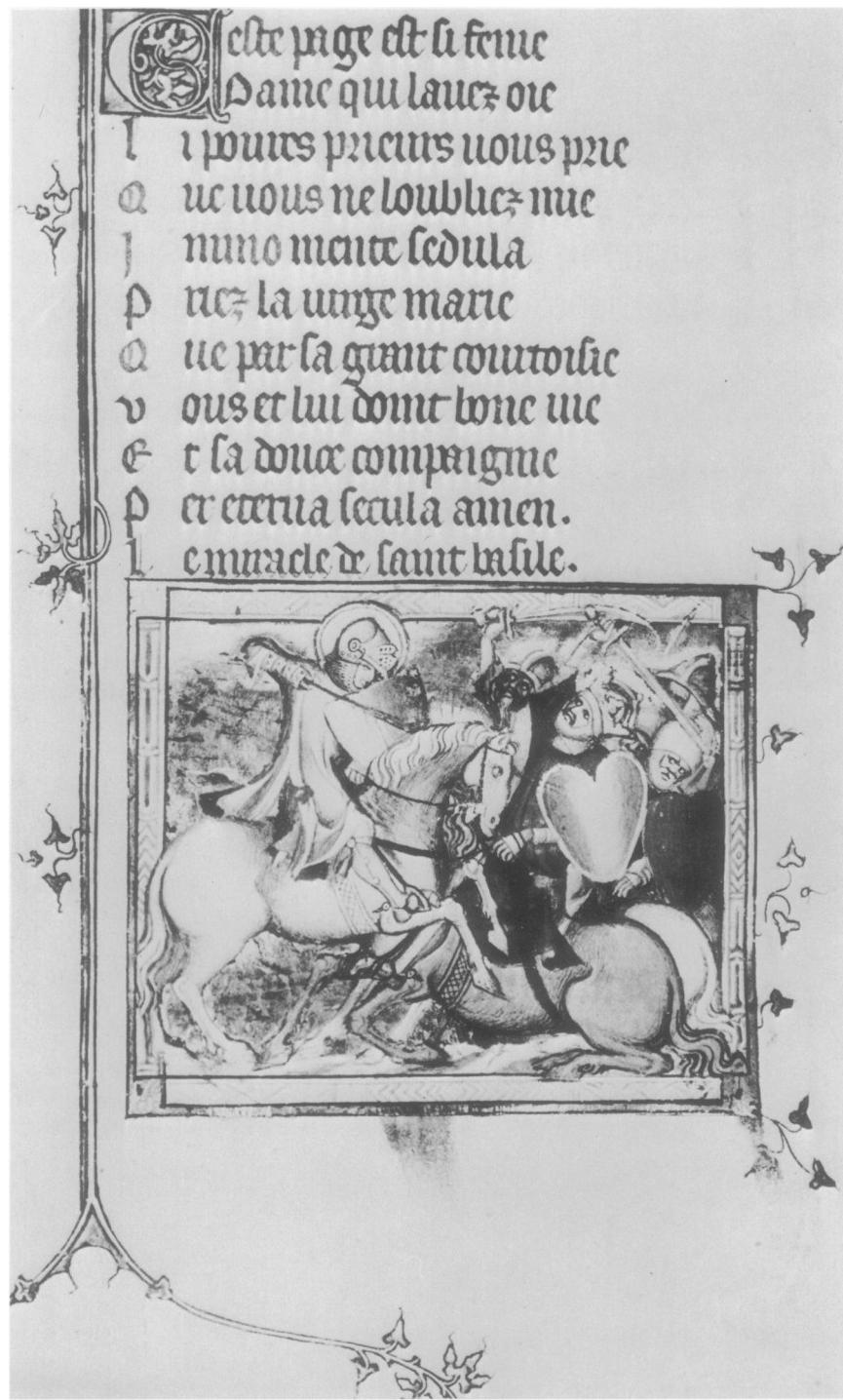
¹¹G. Galavaris, *The Illustrations of the Liturgical Homilies of Gregory Nazianzenus* (Princeton, 1969), 146 and fig. 242.

¹²S. Der Nersessian, *L'illustration des Psautiers grecs du Moyen Age, II, Londres, Add. 19.352* (Paris, 1970), fol. 200, fig. 315.

¹³J. Leroy, *Les manuscrits coptes et coptes-arabes illustrés* (Paris, 1974), 188–89, pl. 106.1. (The captions of this figure and of the next one have been reversed.)

¹⁴Ibid., pl. 105.2.

¹⁵Focillon, *Miracles*, 44. At the time of the Arab attack the emperor was not Theodosios but Leo, the *strategos* of the Anatolian theme, who had revolted. He entered Constantinople on 25 March 717 and was crowned emperor in St. Sophia, after the abdication of Theodosios. The Arab army and fleet stood before Constantinople six months after Leo's accession. The blockade of the capital was lifted on 15 August 718, when all attempts to take Constantinople had failed: G. Ostrogorsky, *History of the Byzantine State* (Oxford, 1956), 138–39. See also M. Canard, "Les expéditions des Arabes contre Constantinople dans l'histoire et dans la légende," *JA* 208 (1926), 80–89.



1. Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, Nouv. acq. fr. 24541, fol. 149v, St. Mercurius killing Emperor Julian (photo: Bibliothèque Nationale)



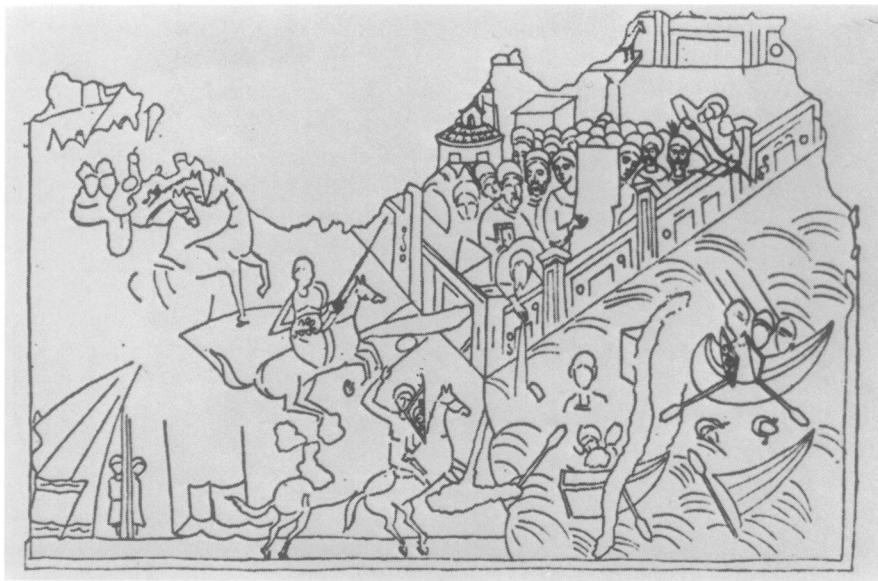
2. Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, gr. 510, fol. 409v, St. Mercurius killing Emperor Julian
(photo: Bibliothèque Nationale)



3. London, Brit. Mus. Or. 6801, St. Mercurius killing Emperor Julian (after J. Leroy, *Les manuscrits coptes et coptes-arabes illustrés* [Paris, 1974], pl. 106.1)



4. Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, Nouv. acq. fr. 24541, fol. 154v, "How Our Lady defended the city of Constantinople" (photo: Bibliothèque Nationale)



5. Prespa, Church of St. Peter, the siege of Constantinople (after C. Grozdanov, *Ohridskoto sidno slikarstvo od XIV vek* [Ochrid, 1980], fig. 31)



6. Madrid, Biblioteca Nacional, vitr. 26.2, fol. 172v, triumphal entry of John Tzimisces (after A. Grabar and M. Manoussacas, *L'illustration du manuscrit de la Bibliothèque Nationale de Madrid* [Venice, 1979], fol. 172v, fig. 221)

the clouds a marvelous lady who received the stones in her mantle and hurled them back at the besiegers.

The sources of Gautier de Coincy have been identified by A. Mussafija and P. von Winterfeld, and the Latin translation of the Akathistos hymn has been studied by G. G. Meersseman and by M. Huglo;¹⁶ my purpose is to show the fundamental difference between Byzantine and Western approaches in representing the same events. The miniature shows a walled city with a large gate; only two soldiers are within the walls, and they take no part in the action (Fig. 4). The besiegers, a group of bearded men wearing short tunics and large turbans on their heads, stand next to a tall catapult and look up with amazement at the Virgin descending from the clouds; she has received in her mantle the large stone they had hurled and is preparing to throw it back on them. The Virgin is crowned and wears a blue dress and a pink mantle with olive green lining.

The Virgin was the protectress of Constanti-

nople, and the Byzantines always implored her assistance in times of danger. It is generally accepted that the second prooimion of the Akathistos hymn: "To the invincible Leader, I, Thy City freed from danger/ I dedicate the thanksgiving for Victory, O Mother of God . . ." was added later "either by the Patriarch Sergios in 626 or, what now seems more probable, by S. Germanos, Patriarch of Constantinople, after the retreat of the Arabs on 24 March 719,"¹⁷ that is, after the siege represented in this miniature.

The Synaxary of the fifth Sunday of Lent commemorated the victories during the three principal sieges of Constantinople, those of the years 621, 677, and 717–718, the last one being the siege mentioned by Gautier de Coincy,¹⁸ victories due to the Virgin. In 626 when Constantinople was besieged by the Persians and the Avars, Patriarch Sergios had ordered that images of the Virgin be placed on the western gates of Constantinople.¹⁹ In the second of his homilies on the Russian attack of Constantinople in 860, Patriarch Photios recalls how the mantle of the Virgin, which was kept in

¹⁶ Mussafija, *Untersuchungen*. P. von Winterfeld, "Rhythmen und Sequenzenstudien," *Zeitschrift für deutsches Altertum und deutsche Litteratur* 47 (1904), 73–100. G. G. Meersseman, *Der Hymnos Akathistos im Abendland*, 2 vols. (Freiburg, 1958–60). M. Huglo, "L'ancienne version latine de l'hymne acathiste," *Muséon* 64, 1–2 (1951), 27–61. See also the excellent summary of the various problems in C. Belting-Ihm, *Sub matris tutela* (Heidelberg, 1976), 36–57.

¹⁷ E. Wellesz, "The 'Akathistos'. A Study in Byzantine Hymnography," *DOP* 9–10 (1956), 147, 152.

¹⁸ A. Frolow, "La dédicace de Constantinople dans la tradition byzantine," *RHR* 127 (1944), 61–127. See also N. H. Baynes, "The Supernatural Defenders of Constantinople," *Byzantine Studies and Other Essays* (London, 1955), 243–60.

¹⁹ Frolow, "Dédicace," 95.

the church of the Blachernae, was carried around the walls and "immediately . . . the barbarians gave up the siege and broke camp."²⁰ In 1186 when Constantinople was besieged by John Branas, Isaac Angelos ordered that the image of the Virgin Hodegetria be carried around the walls.²¹ The mantle of the Virgin kept at the church of the Blachernae was the principal palladium of Constantinople. No early example of the different sieges of Constantinople and of the illustration of the prooimion of the Akathistos is preserved, but in the fresco of the church of St. Peter at Prespa (Fig. 5) one sees the patriarch dipping the maphorion of the Virgin into the sea.²² One of the outstanding examples of the role of the Virgin as *triomphatrix* appears in the representation of the

triumphal entry of John Tzimisces, after his victory over the Bulgarians, in the manuscript of Skylitzes at the National Library of Madrid.²³ The icon of the Virgin, captured from the Bulgarians, is placed on the chariot, while the emperor follows on horseback (Fig. 6). His example was followed by John and Manuel Komnenos; in 1261 when Michael Palaiologos entered Constantinople, he followed on foot the miraculous image of the Hodegetria.

Other compositions could be mentioned showing the different attitudes of the Byzantine and Latin artists, but the miniature painted in the poems of Gautier de Coincy is the oldest preserved example recalling the victory of the Byzantines over their enemies.

Paris

²⁰ *The Homilies of Photius, Patriarch of Constantinople*, trans., intro., and comm. C. Mango (Cambridge, Mass., 1958), 102–3.

²¹ Nikephoros Choniates, Bonn ed. (1835), pp. 496–97.

²² J. Lafontaine-Dosogne, "L'illustration de la première partie de l'hymne Acatiste et sa relation avec les mosaïques de l'Enfance de la Kariye Djami," *Byz* 54 (1984), fig. 27.

²³ A. Grabar and M. Manoussacas, *L'illustration du manuscrit de la Bibliothèque Nationale de Madrid* (Venice, 1979), fol. 172v, fig. 221.